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### **Human Rights Commission Names Human Rights Award Winners**

The Alexandria Human Rights Commission announced today (June 10) that Ideen Solhtalab, the Ethiopian-Eritrean club, and the Latin American Students Society are winners of the Commission's third annual Human Rights Awards. Solhtalab is a recent graduate of Bishop Ireton High School, and the two student groups are from T.C. Williams High School. The Commission, Mayor Donley and City Council will recognize the students' achievements at the City Council meeting tonight; each winner will receive a commemorative plaque and a \$500 award.

The Commission established the Human Rights Awards in 2001 to recognize students who have contributed significantly toward improving basic human rights and fairness for all in our City.

In April, officers of the Human Rights Commission contacted key administrators at T.C. Williams, Bishop Ireton, St. Stephen's & St. Agnes School, Episcopal, the Thornton Friends School and the Alexandria Campus of Northern Virginia Community College to invite high school juniors and seniors and first-year college students to apply for the awards. Nominations were to highlight a student's or student group's contribution toward promoting equality, respect and understanding for all persons regardless of race, color, culture, religion, age, gender, sexual orientation or disability. Numerous applications highlighting

various student contributions within the City were reviewed.

“Our City is a microcosm of the world and our schools are a microcosm of our City;” said Jim McClellan, Chair of the Human Rights Commission, “what these students are trying to accomplish offers a lesson of global importance. If our City's young people can commit themselves to living in harmony with the diversity in the school yard, we have a future.”

Ideen Solhtalab graduated recently from Bishop Ireton High School and has left a positive impression on the student body and faculty. As a Persian raised in America, he has taken the opportunity to share his culture with fellow students at B. I. His participation in the Multicultural Club, Food Forums, Alexandria's Student Forum on Race and Culture and the 2002 Pre-Collegiate Multicultural Leadership Conference allowed him “celebrate the cultures of the world.” Solhtalab stated, “Diversity does not in *any* way mean divided. It is quite the opposite, because it allows for a harmonious balance that leaves others and myself fully satisfied.” He also contributed to the community as a volunteer for the City's Therapeutic Recreation Program, assisting mentally and physically disabled children and teenagers.

The Ethiopian-Eritrean club of T.C. Williams High School has worked to build a sense of harmony among diverse student groups. Three years ago this group dissolved, a reflection of the destruction and battles with Ethiopia and its neighboring country Eritrea, formerly a part of Ethiopia. With the war in Africa, the students in Alexandria felt a need to “unite stronger and remain positive here.” The students from both countries believe “that the war is not for their generation to pick up and continue,” so they joined together to provide community service and to raise funds for their families back home. The club also hosted the Second Annual Ethiopian/Eritrean Essence Night to promote tolerance and harmony. The show was aired on international TV, and the students hope it will have a small impact on world-wide relations.

The Latin American Students Society (LASS) of T.C. Williams High School was created 10 years ago and continues to bring together diverse groups in a high school with many ethnic groups. The students volunteer for many community projects: they served as interpreters for Mt. Vernon Elementary School parent/teacher conferences, participated in the Building Bridges across the Community program, and assisted with food drives and telethons. They also have performed together in talent shows to celebrate their culture and promote understanding.

“The Commission wishes to express its appreciation to the William D. Euille Foundation for funding the Human Rights Awards for this third year, Chair

McClellan continued. "What better way to improve human rights awareness in the community at large than by recognizing our students' laudable contributions."

The Alexandria City Council created the Human Rights Commission in 1975 to advise the City Council on matters related to human rights affecting the City and to oversee the Office of Human Rights. The Office of Human Rights enforces the Alexandria Human Rights Ordinance, which precludes discrimination based on age, race, color, national origin, ancestry, religion, gender, sexual orientation, familial status, or disability.

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